



SUE SZACHOWICZ'S STORY:

From “Cesspool” to Model School: Brockton’s Fight for Student Success

By Kim M. Smithgall

“The steps are simple...but they’re not easy.”

That’s how Susan Szachowicz describes the process that allowed Brockton High School in Massachusetts to move from an institution described by *The Boston Globe* as a “cesspool” to a model school lauded on the front page of *The New York Times* for its academic prowess and transformation.

The secret weapon in the process? Literacy.

Along with the unwavering commitment of a small group of educators to fight against a school culture where academic failure was perfectly acceptable.



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and ICLE Senior Fellow,
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A LONG HISTORY IN THE BROCKTON RING

Szachowicz has a long history in Brockton, an urban area 25 miles south of Boston. She graduated from Brockton High School, did her student teaching there and returned to the school as a social studies teacher in 1975. By 1989, she added high school department head responsibilities to her teaching duties, then moved on to become housemaster (similar to a principal), associate principal for curriculum and instruction, and then principal before retiring in 2013.

The students there have long been known as Brockton Boxers — in recognition of the boxing tradition in the community (both Rocky Marciano and Marvin Hagler are Brockton alumni). Any lingering fighting spirit in the school, however, seemed to be focused on achievements on the football field rather than in the classrooms. In fact, when Szachowicz started teaching, the high school principal said students had a right to fail.

“And they were certainly exercising that right,” Szachowicz mused.

DOWN FOR THE COUNT

In 1998, Brockton’s failure rate on the state tests known as MCAS (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System) was 44 percent in English language arts (ELA) and 75 percent in math; similar results were logged for the next three years. Pupils who didn’t pass these exams would not be able to graduate — no exceptions.

High failure rates weren’t uncommon for large urban districts with demographics similar to those in Brockton (more than 80 percent of Brockton High School’s 4,200 students lived in poverty and a similar percentage were minorities; more than 50 percent spoke a language other than English at home). However, Brockton was truly down for the count — the lowest of the low-achieving schools and if this trajectory persisted, three-quarters of the students would not be getting diplomas.

When *The Boston Globe* article referring to Brockton as a cesspool was published, the Brockton district superintendent called a meeting. “There were administrators and others who he considered to be teacher leaders in the room,” Szachowicz recalled. “The superintendent didn’t have a plan, but he held up the *Globe* in the meeting and said, ‘We can never be on the front page again with a story like this; we need to fix this.’”

Szachowicz begged, cajoled, and bribed (with food) her colleagues to collaborate and find a solution. “No one really wanted to be a part of it at first. The morale was so bad, so negative. We had 334 teachers on the faculty and you might as well have had 334 separate schools,” she said. “Everybody sort of had their own little empire; we weren’t really working together.”

Eventually, 20 educators teamed up to form a restructuring committee. The group comprised mostly teachers and some administrators (department heads). It was co-chaired by Szachowicz (both a teacher and the history department head at the time) and the head of the English department.

“The principal wasn’t on the committee and it wasn’t top-directed,” Szachowicz said. “We came together as a group, looked at the test scores we had and asked, ‘Is this the best that we can be?’ That was our driving question.”

This committee transformed the school using a simple (but not easy!) process. “If you look at the big picture, there were four steps: empowering a team, focusing on literacy, implementing with a plan, and monitoring like crazy,” Szachowicz said.

ROUND ONE: EMPOWER A TEAM

Brockton High School’s restructuring committee had representation from all subject areas and this collaborative approach was a key factor in the group’s success.

“I think one of the things we did best was including teacher voices — even the ones we didn’t particularly want to hear,” Szachowicz quipped. “It was important that everyone was

“Stop trying to change the student; change the conditions under which they learn.”

– Dr. Sue Szachowicz

included. Even the naysayers would say that they didn’t like what we were doing, but they were included in the discussions.”

With a commitment to high standards and no excuses, the Brockton team pored over the MCAS data, eventually determining that improving literacy skills would increase student achievement in all subject areas. The committee members then led structured discussions.

“We asked groups of teachers three questions: what literacy skills do kids need to be successful on the MCAS exams; what skills do they need to be successful in your class; and what skills do they need to be successful in their lives beyond Brockton High?”

(As an aside: the last question was also presented to the local chamber of commerce president, who became an enthusiastic “corner man” and supporter of the school’s transformation efforts.)

“The collaborative culture was absolutely essential,” Szachowicz said.

ROUND TWO: FOCUS ON LITERACY

After many meetings and lots of feedback, Brockton teachers settled on four areas to concentrate their efforts: reading, writing, speaking and reasoning. Four different literacy maps were created to illustrate and define in easy-to-understand language what these terms meant. (Links to the literacy diagrams are on the bottom of this webpage: <https://www.brocktonpublicschools.com/schools/brockton-high-school/about-us/mission-literacy-charts>.) The literacy maps were posted in every classroom and area of the school — even the swimming pool area! They were a constant visual reminder for the entire school community of the growing commitment to completely transform the school culture.

“These literacy skills aren’t trendy, they’re not glitzy, and they’re not a program that you buy off the shelf. But they’re exactly what kids needed to be successful,” Szachowicz commented.

And this focus on literacy would be part of every content area, not just English language arts. Now that plan ruffled some feathers.

One outspoken critic was a science teacher who wondered aloud if the English faculty members would be teaching his science curriculum in their classes since he was required to teach English language arts subject matter to his classes.

“Nobody likes change. I don’t like change. I was in the history department and, God knows, we were steeped in tradition,” Szachowicz said, adding that resistance often occurred because most teachers never learned how to integrate literacy skills into their classes; it was, plain and simple, a scary prospect.

“I’ll use myself as an example. When I was in a teacher preparation program, I was never taught how to use reading strategies for kids. I would give students some difficult readings — primary source documents like the Federalist Papers, for example — and the kids would plow through them and then would look at me and say they didn’t get it. I had no idea how to teach reading and my response would be, ‘Well, yes...just read it again.’ That was my solution.”

Armed with this awareness, the restructuring committee made professional development in teaching literacy a top priority.

“It was about teaching the faculty how to teach it to the kids,” Szachowicz explained. “I say this all the time when I’m making presentations or working with schools today: if you want to improve your schools, you need to focus on the adults, not the kids.”

The committee created literacy workshops, complete with rubrics and scripts to ensure consistent delivery of information. Teachers developed the content and delivered it to their

peers, which helped with buy in. The sessions would fit into the regularly scheduled, hour-long staff meetings and then repeated two weeks later in each department to integrate the teaching of literacy skills with their own academic subject matter.

Of the four main areas of literacy, the restructuring committee decided to tackle writing in the first year and then narrowed down that topic to initially cover how to answer open-response questions — a strategy/skill that could easily be incorporated into all academic areas. Teachers learned not only how to integrate the literacy instruction, but also how to use the rubrics to measure success.

ROUND THREE: IMPLEMENT A PLAN

“In order to carry out this kind of schoolwide change, we had to figure out a structured way of doing it. So, we used a calendar and assigned different departments dates when they would be integrating literacy. We spread it out over the course of the school year. For example, during one particular week in October, the history department would do the literacy initiative. Then a few weeks later, it would be another department and then a few weeks later, another department and so on,” Szachowicz said.

In other words, this wasn’t going to be another case of what Szachowicz calls “drive-by professional development,” where teachers receive training, do an activity for a day and it never gets done again. “Unfortunately, that’s more typical of what happens in schools today,” Szachowicz said.

Brockton’s repeated and ongoing literacy activities in all content areas served a number of purposes. “First, we could observe [through monitoring] that it was, indeed, happening and, second, it gave the kids repeated practice on the writing because we spread it out over the course of the year,” Szachowicz commented.

As anticipated, the repeated practice caused some of the Brockton Boxers to begin entering the ring as resisters. “Many would say, ‘We already did this in my science

class.’ My response was along the lines of, ‘That’s right, because it’s that important for you to learn...so important that you’re gonna hear it in every class,’” said Szachowicz.

And when parents complained to Szachowicz and up the chain of command about the literacy initiative (after their children came home grumbling), the response was always the same: “It’s mandatory.”

Including this type of consistent messaging in Brockton’s plans and anticipating resistance were crucial elements in the efforts to shift expectations for student achievement, Szachowicz pointed out.

ROUND FOUR: MONITOR LIKE CRAZY

The monitoring component, mentioned earlier, was vital, as well. “This was the biggest challenge for us, besides the negativity, and I think every school making these kinds of changes will face a challenge with monitoring,” Szachowicz admitted.

Brockton’s monitoring included principal visits to the classrooms when the literacy instruction was taking place — informal observations only, which were decoupled from any formal teacher evaluation processes. The most valuable monitoring, however, occurred when teachers teamed up to review student work. This was an ongoing practice and served to ensure that every Brockton High School student was being held to the same standards.

Harvard researcher Ronald Ferguson, author of the study “How High Schools Become Exemplary,” was amazed to see Brockton educators collecting and reviewing student work to monitor the program’s fidelity.

“I had never seen that in another school,” he said in a PBS documentary highlighting Brockton’s transformation. “It’s just a level of planning and meticulousness that you just don’t see...the central ingredient is a small cadre of leaders who won’t accept no for an answer. And it’s a continuous improvement process where you’re never satisfied, you’re never finished, and it’s understood that everybody’s got to play.”



ROUND FIVE: FIGHT THE RESISTANCE...

...with data, support and persistence. The persistence paid off in big ways. "After one year of doing writing across the school, we cut the ELA failure rate in half," Szachowicz recalled.

And the following year, the failure rates were cut in half again. Even the most negative naysayers at Brockton High School had no ammunition left to use after that: the data showed success.

Remember the reluctant science teacher? He was also interviewed for the PBS documentary. After seeing the first-year results, he changed his tune. "I'm a science guy. If there's evidence to back it up or I see evidence or we gain evidence, I'm on board," he said. "And we have evidence that this system is working."

And the steady progress continued. Brockton High School has multiple times been selected by the International Center for Leadership in Education as a National Model School (Szachowicz is now a senior fellow at the center). The school was honored with a National School Change Award. And going beyond the prestige of these sometimes nebulous honors to something a little more concrete, the school continues to graduate hundreds

of students who qualify as John and Abigail Adams Scholars, which means they can attend any Massachusetts state college for free — likely a life-changing advantage for students living in poverty.

For educators looking to make a similar transformation in their schools, Szachowicz offered some insights. "This takes time. Making change is about tenacity and if we did it, anyone can," she said, adding that the process doesn't have to be perfect to get started. "If you can just start something in school and start seeing some positive results, one thing just morphs into another — success brings more success. It doesn't have to be perfect to get started and if things don't go exactly right, you can fix it. It's about improvement."

For administrators in particular, Szachowicz stood firm in her advice that they must address resistance directly. "You can't let it fester," she said. "I was working with one principal who said he didn't think he could do that 'because I'm a nice guy.' Being nice and being a leader aren't exclusive. You can be nice and you can address a situation, but you must insist that the initiative be done. You don't have to be stomping your feet or screaming in someone's face, but handle it in some way. Sometimes that just means providing support."

ROUND SIX: PLAY A SHORT VICTORY SONG AND CONTINUE IMPROVING

Today, failure rates at Brockton High School are in the single digits and the dropout rate is just 1.1 percent. The percentage of students earning test scores in the "advanced" and "proficient" categories has skyrocketed. Brockton's Class of 2015 had 933 graduates, many of whom were not only the first in their families to graduate from high school, but also the first to go on to college.

And while it took about a decade to accomplish such a positive transformation, Brockton High (and other schools experiencing this kind of success) have reason to celebrate... at least for a short while. Raise your gloves above your head in victory, maybe play the first 30 seconds of the theme song from the "Rocky" movies...and then get back in the ring to continue fighting for students' academic success.

"After all, until we're at a one hundred percent passing rate, we're not the best we can be," Szachowicz concluded.

SUE SZACHOWICZ, senior fellow, International Center for Leadership in Education, is author of *Transforming Brockton High School: High Standards, High Expectations, No Excuses*.

Going the Distance...Even Among Book-burning and the Great Shakespearean Fiasco

While Brockton High School's transformation is a definite victory, Susan Szachowicz is also quick to describe some of the backpedaling and fisticuffs that were all part of the process.

"As you might expect, we had some missteps and challenges along the way," she commented.

She jokingly calls the restructuring team's first attempt to improve MCAS test scores "the great Shakespearean fiasco." The team reviewed a few years' worth of MCAS English language arts exams and found that there were always questions on Shakespeare. So, the team worked with teachers to integrate Shakespearean sonnets into the curricula...lots of Shakespeare.

You guessed it...the next year, there were no Shakespeare questions on the exam.

"We realized we couldn't be teaching to the test," Szachowicz said. "What you do with literacy has to fit within what you would already be teaching."

It was a minor setback for the team, but they endured, learned a valuable lesson, and moved on.

They also had to move on from the toughest group of staff members who were not willing to embrace the changes taking place in the school.

"They were outright nasty," Szachowicz recalled. "It was the end of the year and many people had been working very hard on the literacy initiative. The principal and I wrote nice thank-you notes to the faculty to let them know how much we appreciated their commitment to improving the school for our kids. With the thank-you notes, we gave them each a copy of the book, *I Read It But I Don't Get It* by Cris Tovani...because what teacher doesn't love a book, right? And this was a very cool one — all kinds of adolescent reading strategies."

When the teachers returned in September, the school was buzzing about a summer event that had taken place.

"One of our teachers had invited a large group of teachers to a summer cookout. As you might expect, I was not on the guest list," Szachowicz mused. "He said to bring the book that had been handed out so they could have a book-burning event. That's how negative some people were. So, we had some real resistance, but we persevered."